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Annotation of "Tulips"

In her poem "Tulips," Sylvia Plath describes an instance in which a hospital patient receives a bouquet of red tulips, and is bothered by their liveliness. The narrator contrasts the quiet and peaceful nothingness of the hospital, with the "too red" and "too excitable" (lines 1, 36) flowers that "watch" (ln. 43) her. The tulips challenge the emptiness of the room, and force the narrator to confront her desire to be "utterly empty" (ln. 30). Plath creates metaphors to represent contrasting images and emotions in her poem.

The narrator distinguishes between the hospital setting and the tulips by creating different metaphors to represent them. She compares the room she is in to winter: "look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in" (ln. 2). She allows herself to disappear into the whiteness, and forget her existence and commitments. In the hospital room, she is void of responsibility. Plath uses the color white ("white walls," "white lids," and "white caps" in lines 4, 9, and 12) and images of purity ("I am a nun now, I have never been so pure" ln. 28) to create contrast against the red tulips. Plath uses the technique of contrast, both in visual and metaphorical contexts in the poem.

The tulips juxtaposed against the winter setting of the hospital room, are compared to life. For the narrator, they are "like an awful baby" (ln. 35) and a "dangerous animal... some great African cat" (ln. 48). She personifies the flowers and characterizes them as "suffocating", "demanding", and "painful". Unlike winter, they are warm and lively. After the tulips are

introduced, Plath writes, “the walls ... seem to be warming themselves” (ln. 46). In her desperation to be away from the world and live as if she were dead, she strains from the site of the tulips. Metaphorically, the tulips are too loud. She can “hear them breathe”(ln. 37) as if they were an infant placed in a quiet room. She is smothered by their color in her once white room. In contrast to the hospital room, they are “a dozen red lead sinkers around [her] neck” (ln. 39), and a “rust-red engine” (ln. 43). Plath’s use of color works well to create contrast in her metaphors. She uses white to represent the temptations of death’s peacefulness, and red to represent the encouragement towards life.

Another form of contrast that Plath explores in her poem is the narrator's waves of guilt. We are introduced to her family by way of a picture on display in stanza three: “my husband and child smiling out of the family photo; / their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks” (lines 20, 21). Although the narrator desires to be free of associations and responsibilities, she is constantly reminded of her obligations. The tulips and their liveliness become something that the narrator is forced to compare herself to. Plath writes that the room had once “swabbed me clear of my loving associations” (ln. 24). Now the flowers challenge her desire to be numb and empty. Although not explicitly stated, readers can assume that the metaphor for the “awful baby” correlates with the narrator's maternal guilt. Plath hints at the narrator's familial responsibilities and her waves of guilt and shamelessness, by introducing a child in place of the bouquet.

Plath’s use of color, contrast, and juxtaposition work to create a piece detailed enough to display her complex emotions. By the end of the poem, the narrator is “aware of [her] heart: it opens and closes / its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love” (lines 49, 50). The tulips change her way of thinking and ultimately complicate her already intense emotions.